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Scientists are putting drones to work studying the natural world

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The idea of an unmanned plane that can swoop in on you wherever you are is pretty creepy (Big Brother, anyone?), but like many military advances, drone technology can be used for other purposes, such as offering wildlife biologists and other scientists a true 'bird's eye' view of nature and helping us to better understand the natural world.

For gathering some data about animal populations and migrations, just getting close to the subjects of the studies is hard enough without having to haul expensive sensors and equipment deep into the middle of their habitat, not to mention the effect that flying an airplane over them might have. However, by using a remote-controlled drone to take aerial photos of the area, scientists are able to quickly get accurate data for their research, without unnecessarily disturbing the wildlife.

According to the NY Times, drones have already been used to study seals and sea lions in Alaska, to search for pygmy rabbits in Idaho, to monitor rare plant species in Hawaii, and counted Sandhill crane populations in Colorado. Some scientists that have used the drones in their work have said that the counts and data are as precise, or more so in some instances, than those done solely with human eyes.

The drones aren't without fault, as they have limited battery life and take more time and personnel to use (compared to using planes or helicopters) but they also have a number of benefits for wildlife study. Drones are said to be able to fly much closer to populations of animals without spooking them, and can be used in locations that might be hazardous to a helicopter, thereby extending the reach of researchers and reducing the risks involved in field surveys done from the air.

Drone technology won't replace all helicopters, airplanes, and human observers in wildlife studies, due to the need for long-range surveys with a skilled scientist on board, but because drones can not only do accurate surveys, but also do the job at a lower cost, more scientists are starting to request their use in their own projects.

Drones have also been used by hobbyists to catch wildlife footage, by game preserves to catch rhino poachers, and by activists to keep an eye on whaling ships.

While some people may take exception to using flying robots to study the natural world, I for one, welcome our scientific drone overlords. How do you feel about it?